

What is Judaism?

Teacher Guide

Middle School (Grades 6-8)

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Lesson Overview

Duration: 2-3 class periods (90-135 minutes total)

Grade Level: 6-8

Subject Areas: Social Studies, World History, Religious Studies, Geography

Learning Objectives

By the end of this lesson, students will be able to:

1. Define Judaism as both a religion and an ethno-religion with ancient origins
2. Explain the core concepts of monotheism and the covenant with Abraham
3. Identify the geographic origins of Judaism and its connection to the Land of Israel
4. Describe the historical journey of the Jewish people from ancient Israel through diaspora
5. Recognize the diversity of Jewish communities worldwide (Ashkenazi, Sephardi, Mizrahi)
6. Understand key Jewish practices, holidays, and values
7. Analyze the concept of resilience in Jewish history and identity

Standards Alignment

Common Core ELA Standards

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RH.6-8.1: Cite specific textual evidence to support analysis of primary and secondary sources.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RH.6-8.2: Determine the central ideas or information of a primary or secondary source; provide an accurate summary of the source distinct from prior knowledge or opinions.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RH.6-8.4: Determine the meaning of words and phrases as they are used in a text, including vocabulary specific to domains related to history/social studies.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RH.6-8.7: Integrate visual information (e.g., in charts, graphs, photographs, videos, or maps) with other information in print and digital texts.

National Curriculum Standards for Social Studies (NCSS)

Theme 1 - Culture: Understanding cultural diversity and the role of religion in shaping societies

Theme 3 - People, Places, and Environments: Geographic connections between people and place

Theme 5 - Individuals, Groups, and Institutions: How religious institutions shape identity and community

Theme 9 - Global Connections: Understanding worldwide Jewish diaspora communities

C3 Framework for Social Studies

D2.His.1.6-8: Analyze connections among events and developments in broader historical contexts.

D2.His.2.6-8: Classify series of historical events and developments as examples of change and/or continuity.

D2.Geo.2.6-8: Use maps, satellite images, photographs, and other representations to explain relationships between locations and changes over time.

D2.Civ.10.6-8: Explain the relevance of personal interests and perspectives, civic virtues, and democratic principles when people address issues and problems in government and civil society.

Materials Needed

- Video: "What is Judaism?" by Noa Tishby (Episode 1)
- Student handouts (provided)
- World map or digital mapping tool
- Chart paper or whiteboard
- Colored markers/pencils
- Index cards for exit tickets
- Optional: Images of Jewish artifacts, synagogues, holiday celebrations

Vocabulary

Tier 2 (Academic):

- Covenant
- Diaspora
- Indigenous
- Resilience
- Commemorate

Tier 3 (Domain-Specific):

- Judaism
- Monotheism
- Ethno-religion
- Torah
- Synagogue
- Kosher
- Shabbat
- Ashkenazi
- Sephardi
- Mizrahi
- Talmud

Lesson Sequence

Day 1: Introduction and Core Concepts (45 minutes)

Warm-Up (10 minutes):

1. Display the question: "What do you already know about Judaism?"
2. Use a KWL chart (Know, Want to Know, Learned) on the board
3. Have students share prior knowledge in small groups, then share out
4. Record responses in the "K" column without judgment

Vocabulary Preview (10 minutes):

1. Introduce key vocabulary using visual supports
2. Create a word wall with terms and simple definitions
3. Have students predict meanings based on word parts (e.g., "mono" in monotheism)
4. Focus on: Judaism, monotheism, covenant, ethno-religion, Torah

Video Viewing - Part 1 (15 minutes):

1. Distribute viewing guide (Student Handout #1)
2. Set purpose: "As you watch, think about what makes Judaism unique as both a religion and a cultural identity"
3. Play video with pause points at:
 - After Abraham and monotheism explanation
 - After Moses and Torah at Mount Sinai
 - After description of Temple periods
4. At each pause, allow 30 seconds for note-taking

Initial Discussion (10 minutes):

Facilitate whole-class discussion using these prompts:

- What surprised you about the origins of Judaism?
- How is monotheism different from other beliefs at that time?
- Why do you think the covenant with Abraham was so important?
- What questions do you have so far?

Day 2: Diaspora, Diversity, and Practices (45 minutes)

Review and Connect (5 minutes):

1. Quick review of Day 1 key concepts
2. Preview today's focus: Jewish communities around the world and Jewish practices

Video Viewing - Part 2 (15 minutes):

1. Review viewing guide for Part 2 sections
2. Play remainder of video with pause points at:
 - After explanation of diaspora and different Jewish communities
 - After description of holidays and traditions
 - After discussion of Jewish values and resilience
3. Students complete viewing guide

Mapping Activity (15 minutes):

1. Provide world maps (Student Handout #2)
2. Students mark:
 - Land of Israel (origin point)
 - Regions where different Jewish communities developed (Ashkenazi, Sephardi, Mizrahi, Ethiopian, Indian)
 - Major diaspora movements
3. Use color coding to show different communities
4. Add a compass rose and map key

Small Group Discussion (10 minutes):

Divide class into groups of 3-4. Each group discusses one prompt:

- Group A: How did Jewish communities maintain their identity despite being spread around the world?
- Group B: What role do holidays and traditions play in connecting Jewish people?
- Group C: What does "resilience" mean in the context of Jewish history?
- Group D: How does Judaism balance diversity (different communities) with unity (shared identity)?

Groups share key insights with class.

Day 3: Analysis, Application, and Assessment (45 minutes)

Comparative Analysis (15 minutes):

1. Create a Venn diagram comparing Judaism to another religion students have studied
2. Focus on:
 - Sacred texts
 - Places of worship
 - Key beliefs
 - Important holidays
 - Connection to geography
3. Discuss similarities and differences as a class

Values in Action Activity (15 minutes):

1. Review Jewish values mentioned in video: education, debate, making the world better, compassion, gratitude
2. Students complete "Values Connection" worksheet (Student Handout #3)
3. Connect Jewish values to universal ethical principles
4. Discuss: How do these values appear in other traditions or communities?

Assessment (15 minutes):

Students complete one of the following (teacher choice or student choice):

Option A: Written Response

Choose one Jewish holiday mentioned in the video (Shabbat, Passover, or Hanukkah). Explain what it commemorates and how it connects to Jewish history and identity. Use specific examples from the video.

Option B: Graphic Organizer

Create a visual representation showing the journey of Judaism from ancient Israel through diaspora to modern times. Include at least 5 key events or concepts.

Option C: Reflection Essay

The video states that Jewish holidays can be summed up as "They tried to kill us, they didn't succeed, let's eat." What does this quote reveal about Jewish resilience and perspective on history?

Differentiation Strategies

For English Language Learners:

- Provide vocabulary with visual supports and native language cognates
- Offer sentence frames for discussions
- Allow use of video transcript
- Pair with bilingual buddy

For Advanced Learners:

- Research one specific Jewish community (Ethiopian Jews, Sephardi Jews, etc.) and present findings
- Compare the Exodus story across Judaism, Christianity, and Islam
- Investigate the archaeological evidence for ancient Israel
- Explore the Talmud's debate tradition with text examples

For Students with Learning Differences:

- Chunk video into shorter segments
- Provide graphic organizers with partial completion
- Offer audio recording option for written responses
- Use visual timeline instead of text-heavy notes

Extension Activities

Visual/Musical Arts Extension:

Symbolic Art Project

Students create an original artwork representing one aspect of Judaism discussed in the lesson:

1. Choose a focus: monotheism, covenant, diaspora, resilience, holiday celebration, or Jewish values
2. Research traditional Jewish art forms: illuminated manuscripts, papercut art (mizrach), hamsa designs, or menorah symbolism
3. Create an original piece using any medium (drawing, painting, collage, digital art)
4. Include at least 3 symbolic elements with explanations
5. Write an artist's statement (1 paragraph) explaining choices

Standards Addressed:

- VA:Cr1.2.8a: Collaboratively shape an artistic investigation of an aspect of present-day life using a contemporary practice of art or design.
- VA:Cn11.1.8a: Distinguish different ways art is used to represent, establish, reinforce, and reflect group identity.

Math/Science Extension:

Calendar Systems and Astronomy

Students explore the mathematics and astronomy behind the Jewish calendar:

1. Compare lunar (Hebrew) and solar (Gregorian) calendars
2. Calculate when holidays will fall using the Hebrew calendar system
3. Research why a 13th month is added in leap years (7 times in 19 years)
4. Create a visual model showing how the lunar cycle determines months
5. Calculate: If Rosh Hashanah falls on September 16, 2024, predict when it will occur in 2025, 2026, and 2027

Challenge Problem: The Jewish day begins at sunset rather than midnight. If sunset in Jerusalem on Friday is 6:47 PM and Saturday sunset is 6:48 PM, calculate the exact length of Shabbat in minutes. How does this change throughout the year?

Standards Addressed:

- CCSS.MATH.CONTENT.6.RP.A.3: Use ratio and rate reasoning to solve real-world and mathematical problems.
- MS-ESS1-1: Develop and use a model of the Earth-sun-moon system to describe cyclic patterns of lunar phases.

Assessment Rubric

Written Response/Essay Rubric (4-point scale)

Content Understanding (40%):

- 4: Demonstrates thorough understanding with specific, accurate details from video
- 3: Shows good understanding with some specific details
- 2: Shows basic understanding but lacks specific details
- 1: Shows minimal understanding or significant misconceptions

Use of Evidence (30%):

- 4: Uses multiple specific examples from video to support ideas
- 3: Uses some specific examples from video
- 2: Uses general references without specific details
- 1: Little or no evidence from video

Organization and Clarity (20%):

- 4: Well-organized with clear introduction, body, and conclusion
- 3: Generally organized with clear main ideas
- 2: Some organization but ideas may be unclear
- 1: Lacks clear organization

Vocabulary and Conventions (10%):

- 4: Uses lesson vocabulary accurately; few or no errors
- 3: Uses some lesson vocabulary; minor errors
- 2: Limited vocabulary use; some errors interfere with meaning
- 1: Minimal vocabulary; many errors

Discussion Questions (Tiered by Complexity)

Level 1 - Recall and Comprehension:

1. What does monotheism mean?
2. Where did Judaism begin?
3. Name three different types of Jewish communities mentioned in the video.
4. What are two Jewish holidays and what do they celebrate?

Level 2 - Analysis and Connection:

1. How did the diaspora affect Jewish identity and practice?
2. Why is the Land of Israel described as central to Jewish identity?
3. How do Jewish holidays help preserve history and identity?
4. What does it mean to call Judaism an "ethno-religion"?

Level 3 - Evaluation and Synthesis:

1. The video states that Judaism emphasizes "what you do" over "what you believe." What does this mean and why might this be significant?
2. How has diversity strengthened rather than weakened Jewish identity over time?
3. What lessons about resilience can be learned from Jewish history?
4. How might being part of a diaspora community differ from being indigenous to a land? What challenges and opportunities might arise?

Cultural Responsiveness Notes

Building Background:

- Acknowledge students' own religious and cultural backgrounds
- Frame as learning about world religions and cultures, not promoting any faith
- Emphasize academic study of religion as part of understanding history and society

Classroom Climate:

- Create safe space for questions and clarification
- Address stereotypes or misconceptions respectfully
- Acknowledge persecution and antisemitism without dwelling on trauma
- Balance serious historical content with cultural celebration

Family Communication:

- Send home parent letter explaining unit focus and standards addressed
- Offer alternative assignments if families prefer (study another ancient religion)
- Invite families to share relevant cultural or religious knowledge

Resources for Teachers

Background Reading:

- "Judaism: A Very Short Introduction" by Norman Solomon
- "Jewish Literacy" by Joseph Telushkin
- PBS series "Heritage: Civilization and the Jews"

Primary Sources:

- Excerpts from Torah (Genesis chapters on Abraham)
- Historical maps of ancient Israel
- Photographs of archaeological sites (Temple Mount, Masada)
- Images of Jewish artifacts from different communities

Digital Resources:

- National Museum of American Jewish History (digital collections)
- Yad Vashem (for Holocaust education if extending unit)
- Jewish Virtual Library
- My Jewish Learning (educational articles)

Reflection Questions for Teachers

After teaching this lesson, consider:

1. Which activities most engaged students?
2. What misconceptions emerged and how were they addressed?
3. How did students from different backgrounds respond to the content?
4. What adjustments would improve the lesson for next time?
5. Which extension activities generated the most interest?
6. How might this lesson connect to upcoming units or standards?

Homework Options

Option 1: Interview someone from your family or community about their cultural or religious traditions. How are traditions passed down in your family? What values are important? Write a 1-page reflection comparing your findings to what you learned about Judaism.

Option 2: Research one Jewish holiday in depth (Passover, Rosh Hashanah, Yom Kippur, Sukkot, Purim, or Shavuot). Create a presentation explaining its origins, how it's celebrated, and what it commemorates.

Option 3: Create a timeline showing major events in Jewish history from Abraham (4,000 years ago) to today. Include at least 8 events with brief descriptions.

Answer Key for Student Handouts

Viewing Guide - Part 1:

1. Approximately 4,000 years ago in the Land of Israel
2. Monotheism - belief in one God (revolutionary at the time when people worshiped multiple gods)
3. Abraham made a covenant (sacred agreement) with God
4. They moved to Egypt, were enslaved, Moses led them out, wandered 40 years in desert, received Torah at Mount Sinai, returned to Israel
5. The First and Second Temples in Jerusalem (10th century BC to 1st century AD)

Viewing Guide - Part 2:

1. 70 AD - Romans expelled Jews from their homes
2. Ashkenazi (Europe), Sephardi (Spain/North Africa), Mizrahi (Middle East), also Ethiopian and Indian communities
3. Each community developed unique customs, foods, and dialects while maintaining shared Jewish identity
4. Shabbat (Friday evening to Saturday evening - rest and reflection), Passover (liberation from Egypt), Hanukkah (Maccabees' victory, religious freedom)
5. Education, debate, making the world better, respect, compassion, gratitude, accountability
6. Less than 16 million out of 8 billion (about 0.2% of world population)